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Van Tyne, Claude Halstead

Democracy's educational problem

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Democracy's Educational Problem

By

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Issued by

THE NATIONAL SECURITY LEAGUE

19 WEST 44th STREET

NEW YORK CITY

DEMOCRACY'S EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

PERVERTED EDUCATION

The most wonderful educational fact of the age has appealed to the imagination of every thinking man, but the significance of it for our own educational system has not everywhere been appreciated. This outstanding fact is that one generation of carefully planned, state-directed education has left on the minds of the German people exactly the impress it was designed to leave. Teachers everywhere are seeing an overwhelming proof of their thesis, loudly asserted before but only half believed, that "Education actually is potent to direct emotions and to build ideals into character." To be more specific we have all seen the wonderful but ignoble work that Germany's school system has performed. We have seen it grind relentlessly and perfectly until a Hohenzollern product, "made in Germany," was piteously turned out. It has been revealed to us that those who survived that hard regime would do the Kaiser's will in air or under sea—with Zeppelin or Submarine they hasten to do his bidding,—barbarous and inhuman as it might be. How far the plan was conscious, or to what extent it was unconscious we do not know, but of this we are sure that there radiated from Prussia through all the German empire a scheme of education calculated to fix the Teutonic mind from its youth to accept with blind submission the ambitions of the ruling dynasty, to believe in Germany, the exalted, and to be obsessed like a national kleptomaniac with the idea that Germany must conquer her neighbor's territory. The Imperial family did not neglect to have its praises sung by the text-book writers. "In time of danger," says one text-book, "Divine Providence has always sent a Hohenzollern to rescue Germany. Only grateful devotion to our prince can maintain the state on the heights she has attained." No kind of text-book was left unused for the purpose of administration. Readers quoted the passage from Heine about waking the ancient Teutonic battle madness, and rousing Thor from his thousand years' sleep to shatter the Gothic cathedrals (Rheims Cathedral perhaps) with his giant hammer, and send the old German thunder crashing as nought ever crashed before in the history of the world. Could an Apache Indian shout a more blatant battle song? The very choruses roared all over Germany reminded Germans that they were of the Hammer God's race and ought to inherit his world empire. Even the omissions in education worked to the same warlike end. The Kaiser would never interfere with the student duelling, because it drilled the future officers in the cruelty suited to the war of frightfulness which the General Staff had planned.

All of this perverted education had the aim of preparing the German mind to be exploited when their rulers were ready for the carrying out of the aims of "the little group of ambitious men," to use President Wilson's words, "who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools." It is far from me to wish ever to behold education in America directed even for a good purpose by any small group at the center of our political system, but would it not be well if it were impressed upon those who direct education from the many centers scattered all over this broad land that certain fundamental American ideals ought to be everywhere impressed upon American youth? The crisis through which this nation recently passed, before it could be brought to a wholehearted support of a war begun for the purpose of preserving the most vital principles upon which it was founded, has aroused educators everywhere, like a fire-bell in the night, to understand that we must employ our educational machinery more than we have in the past to imbue every American citizen with a comprehension of democratic principles.

If we can find some definite means of securing an understanding of democratic ideals, we may expect as a result a patriotic zeal in defending them. If Americanism is a belief in and a habit of supporting such ideals, then we may hope that such a process will produce it.

There are many things that differing minds would select as the minimum essentials that our schools should teach in this direction, and I wish to suggest only a few which will make my thought more concrete. The American's theory of the state is that it exists to protect him in the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that the individual is the important thing not the state. An opposing theory, and it happens to be the German theory, is that the state is the important thing, that to it the individual owes everything, life and liberty and even blind obedience of orders to do cruel and brutal acts. Why not teach that difference to boys and girls instead of mere dry facts about the organs of government and their functions? Let us not be so shy and modest about the virtues of our political system. The Germans are not. Let us say

frankly that democracy implies a nation in peace, that autocracy implies a nation in arms. We can teach frankly too, that our great principle of local self-government is wholly at conflict with the German ambitions for world-empire, and with her whole tendency of government in provinces like Poland and Alsace-Lorraine.

Must Speak Out

It is the spirit of our institutions which we have failed to impart to the rising generations. We have been afraid to state that our democratic philosophy upholds the Christian spirit of brotherhood, asserts the wisdom of united action for the good of all, and seeks to save the weak from the aggression of the strong. We have refrained from saying that the autocratic philosophy operated to deaden the sentiment of humanity, that in affairs of state it sneered at mercy and gentleness, at love and kindness, that the foundation of that philosophy was the stern law of the survival of the fittest, that, to be concrete, Belgium, a weak state, had no rights when she stood in the way of Germany, a big state. Now the time has come to speak out even if we hurt an autocrat's feelings. We must ask and solve a series of very important questions. In teaching civics is it enough to teach the mere forms of government? Can we not teach contrasting systems, that of England and that of Germany? Is it not proper to venture upon a little historical geography along with our political and topographical geography? How would the manner of the growth of Prussia compare with the manner of the growth of the British empire or of our own Republic? Would it be instructive to put side by side in our readers quotations revealing the ideals of the typical Prussian, Frederick the Great, and the typical American, George Washington, or of the German hero, Bismark, and the American hero, Abraham Lincoln? In the field of history can we not compare those events which have brought about the advance of civilization and those which have already merely advanced the interests of a dynasty or a nation?

To be even more bold, are we going to tackle some of the prejudices which in the past have arrayed us against the only people in the world who speak the same language, who express the same ideas, and who desire, as Lord Grey says, the same kind of world to live in? However much we may love and admire France —and I will acknowledge myself second to none in my attachment to that noble race and beautiful land—have we not had occasion to wonder during the last three years why the mass of American people rallied to the moral support of France rather than of England in the Great War? Why has the country whose language we speak, whose customs we have followed, whose ideas of Liberty we have inherited, and whose legal procedure has determined ours, made so little appeal to the average American? Why has this brave people, changing the outward expression of their civilization from a peaceful to a militaristic one in the midst of the most frightful of wars, saving civilization itself from the brutal assault of the Prussian Autocracy, and rising to a pinnacle of true fame and glorious service to mankind—why has this noble people won so little sympathy here in the land dominated by their nearest of kin?

Histories Misleading

The answer in part is found by a recent study of the treatment of the American Revolution in text-book histories of the United States. The author, Mr. Altschul, drawing his data from some ninety-three text-books, forty of which were in use twenty years ago and the remaining fifty-three in use at present, establishes some significant results. Of these books he finds that fourteen of the older and fifteen of the newer deal fully with the grievances of the colonists, make no reference to general political conditions in England prior to the American Revolution, nor to any prominent Englishman—like Pitt, Burke, Fox and Barre —who defended the American cause. Seven of the old and five of the new mention Pitt only, but do not explain English political conditions. A small minority present those facts about British sympathizers with the American cause, and their temporary political helplessness, which alone can give an American reader a proper understanding of the Revolution. Who can doubt that this neglect to teach the truth, as every scholarly student of the American Revolution knows it today, has prejudiced the minds of this and older generations of Americans against Great Britain?

But that is not all. Except in our better colleges and universities the extent of our debt to England for most of the institutions which dominate in our republic has not been taught. Here and there in our grade and high schools a teacher of exceptional equipment has told his pupils of our indebtedness. But the leaven has not penetrated far. We have as a people taken unnoticed as the air we breathe the institutions of representative Government;

trial by jury; no taxation without representation, habeas corpus, right of public assembly and of protest, free press, free speech and right of petition—rights that have all been created and developed by the English speaking race. Many Americans seem to think that in some mysterious way Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Patrick Henry invented them one morning before breakfast.

Teach Too Little

We have taught the American youth all too little about the foundations of their liberty. The story of the blood and suffering of the builders, of the tempest that raged them while they built, of the martyrs who were the architects of those foundations. This history has been too little told. Autocrats see to it that their people are impressed with their rulers' virtues and those of their ancestors, but democracies leave their citizens to take their liberties as they do the air they breathe. Republics are ungrateful only because there is nobody whose interest it is to inculcate that gratitude. Can we not henceforth teach our youth that it is not the "flag that makes us free," but the heroic struggles of Englishmen and of our American ancestors who took up the struggle on this side of the Atlantic? We must have the story of that struggle graven deep in the mind of every boy and girl in America, and yet only a year ago, at the Schoolmasters' Club in the Athens of Washtenaw County, I heard a teacher solemnly propose that we make room for ancient history by dropping English history. Indeed, in the very school house where we sat a student who elected the German language need not take English history. Reason seemed to have fled to brutish beasts.

Ask the average citizen whence came our American liberties. In nine cases out of ten, if he is not wholly stumped by such an academic question, he will say that little verse from his catechism, "our ancestors in the American Revolution won them." If you ask, "Well, how about England?"—he will reply, "Oh, she tried to take them away from us." By nursing that ignorance and prejudice we have taught some seven or eight generations of Americans to hate England. Only now, when this shallow idea becomes a menace to the welfare of America, do we wake to the folly of ever having let it be born. May all the ministers of grace defend us, if we do not begin from this moment to teach the truth and the whole truth. Isn't it just as easy to speak the truth and say that our fathers fought for the rights of Englishmen, as to tell over again the old silly story of the embattled farmers winning our liberties at Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill—leaving the impression as is too often the fact, that they did not exist before?

War of 1812

In teaching the War of 1812 also the true character of our dispute with England is rarely made clear in our text-books. When England insisted upon the right of search and of impressment of sailors whom she believed to be her subjects, she was only insisting upon a right under an international law accepted and acted upon by most nations of the world. Moreover, text-books rarely make understood the world conditions, Napoleon's ambitious aims—and his continental system which England was fighting, and thus upholding the freedom of nations to trade where they would. They do not explain how England's back was against the wall in her fearful struggle to save herself and the world from the assaults of a conqueror seeking world domination. They have not been bold enough to point out that the picture of James Madison, apostle of peace, allied with Napoleon Bonaparte, the genius of war, is one to arouse the sardonic laughter of a cynic.

Not only the text-books must correct the wrong done in the past by the ill-teaching of American history, but all of us who know the truth must try to correct the wrong views of men of the older generations who have been badly taught. If some benevolent old gentleman tells you that he can't forgive England for sympathizing with the South in the Civil War, can you not recall for him that the cotton weavers of Lancashire starved and found no fault when we blockaded the South and cut off the supply of cotton? Can you not read to him the words of John Bright, that "the British people clung to freedom with an unfaltering trust" when, in our Civil War, their Tory government "were hostile or coldly neutral?" Tell him that these English aristocrats saw their error a few years later, and some of them joined with our historians in declaring that it was not in a lordly castle on English soil that the noblest statesman of the century was born, but in a lowly log-cabin in America. If he asks you with a sneer when England became our friend, can you not give him the soft answer which turneth away wrath, "Yes, the exact date is 1867 when through the second reform bill England became a democracy." Since then she has

patiently endured much from us, and in Manila Bay she ranged her ships and guns with ours. For years she has been our friend, faithful and just to us, even when our politicians scorned and spurned her.

There are many reasons why this past wrong must be righted. The present crisis demands it, but the future welfare of democratic peoples the world over demands that we must foster the friendly feeling between the English and the American people. In that friendship only do I see any practical way for the realization of the wide-spread desire to attain a permanent peace. I have little hope in artificial leagues to enforce peace, or other devices not founded on the everlasting rock of human nature. To me it is an inspiring fact filled with promise for the future, that once more England and America—mother and daughter—sit hand in hand in the great council chamber of the nations. May we never part again, but in perfect sympathy work together for the peace and progress of the world.

Due Proportion

The contributions of other peoples to our civilization are not to be ignored in the educational scheme which is here suggested, but care must be exercised to keep all elements in due proportion. Propaganda in the interest of a particular race or nation takes the character of false or unfair emphasis laid upon the contributions of that race or nation to the cultural development of our people. All that I advocate is an honest and truthful teaching to American youth of the true sources, whatever they are, from which American character and institutions have been derived. Above all there must never be in the future an easy-going indifference as to whether the growing youths of our country are imbibing the best traditions of America and the true and fundamental doctrines of democracy. They must be inspired with the conviction, in the words of the President, that "The right is more precious than peace," and "that we shall fight for these things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations." Only thus will we find, when such another crisis comes in our nation's history, that all of our splendid youth is dedicated without hesitation to any heroic task necessary to make sure "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

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